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QUESTION 1: John Rawl’s first principle.

Rawl’s first theory speaks on equal basic rights and liberties. The First Principle of social justice concerns political institutions: Each person has the same and indefeasible [permanent] claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all. This principle means that everyone has the same basic liberties, which can never be taken away. Rawls included most of the liberties in the U.S. Bill of Rights, such as freedom of speech and due process of law. He added some liberties from the broader area of human rights, like freedom of travel.

Rawls recognized the right of private individuals, corporations, or workers to own private property. But he omitted the right to own the "means of production" (e.g., mines, factories, farms). He also left out the right to inherit wealth. These things were not basic liberties in his view. Rawls agreed that basic liberties could be limited, but "only for the sake of liberty." Thus, curbing the liberties of an intolerant group that intended to harm the liberties of others may be justified.

QUESTION 2: The second principle: distributive economic justice.

The Second Principle of social justice concerns social and economic institutions: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions:

First, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the Difference Principle). This Second Principle focused on equality. Rawls realized that a society could not avoid inequalities among its people. Inequalities result from such things as one's inherited characteristics, social class, personal motivation, and even luck. Even so, Rawls insisted that a just society should find ways to reduce inequalities in areas where it can act.

By "offices and positions" in his Second Principle, Rawls meant especially the best jobs in private business and public employment. He said that these jobs should be "open" to everyone by the society providing "fair equality of opportunity." One way for a society to do this would be to eliminate discrimination. Another way would be to provide everyone easy access to education. The most controversial element of his theory of social justice was his Difference Principle. He first defined it in a 1968 essay. "All differences in wealth and income, all social and economic inequalities," he wrote, "should work for the good of the least favored."

Later, when he wrote A Theory of Justice, he used the phrase, "least-advantaged members of society" to refer to those at the bottom of economic ladder. These might be unskilled individuals, earning the lowest wages in the society. Under the Difference Principle, Rawls favored maximizing the improvement of the "least-advantaged" group in society. He would do this not only by providing "fair equality of opportunity," but also by such possible ways as a guaranteed minimum income or minimum wage (his preference). Rawls agreed that this Difference Principle gave his theory of social justice a liberal character.

QUESTION 3: The original position

The original position is designed to be a fair and impartial point of view that is to be adopted in our reasoning about fundamental principles of justice. In taking up this point of view, we are to imagine ourselves in the position of free and equal persons who jointly agree upon and commit themselves to principles of social and political justice. The main distinguishing feature of the original position is “the veil of ignorance”: to insure impartiality of judgment, the parties are deprived of all knowledge of their personal characteristics and social and historical circumstances. They do know of certain fundamental interests they all have, plus general facts about psychology, economics, biology, and other social and natural sciences. The parties in the original position are presented with a list of the main conceptions of justice drawn from the tradition of social and political philosophy, and are assigned the task of choosing from among these alternatives the conception of justice that best advances their interests in establishing conditions that enable them to effectively pursue their final ends and fundamental interests. Rawls contends that the most rational choice for the parties in the original position are two principles of justice: which are the two principles discussed earlier.

QUESTION 4: Summarize John Rawl’s idea of justice.

Rawls's theory of justice revolves around the adaptation of two fundamental principles of justice which would, in turn, guarantee a just and morally acceptable society. The first principle guarantees the right of each person to have the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the liberty of others. The second principle states that social and economic positions are to be (a) to everyone's advantage and (b) open to all.

A key problem for Rawls is to show how such principles would be universally adopted, and here the work borders on general ethical issues. He introduces a theoretical "veil of ignorance" in which all the "players" in the social game would be placed in a situation which is called the "original position." Having only a general knowledge about the facts of "life and society," each player is to make a "rationally prudential choice" concerning the kind of social institution they would enter into contract with. By denying the players any specific information about themselves it forces them to adopt a generalized point of view that bears a strong resemblance to the moral point of view. "Moral conclusions can be reached without abandoning the prudential standpoint and positing a moral outlook merely by pursuing one's own prudential reasoning under certain procedural bargaining and knowledge constraints."